

## SYMBOL COMMUNICATION PROGRAMME AT OCCC - (Shirley McNaughton )

In the previous presentation you heard Debbie describing a program that was implemented with severely and profoundly mentally retarded children. The children in our programs have approximately the same range of physical handicaps but they have a higher mental capability, most of them in the normal or near normal range. As a result the approaches and techniques we were able to use with these children are more advanced and the progress is much quicker.

In this presentation I will first be talking about ways in which we implement the symbol systems with the children in our programs. I will then be presenting some examples of communication that the children have done with the Symbols. Finally, I will present a summary of the various symbol programs which are being conducted in the United States and Canada.

### STARTING A CHILD ON SYMBOLS

The first thing we work on with a young child beginning to use symbols is the concept that symbols have the same function as speech. We give the child symbols he can use immediately. The minute he is given a symbol he uses it in conversation with the teacher. Then we start to develop as many symbol meanings as we can to build up a working vocabulary. We begin with symbols that are of interest to the child. Sometimes it's "happy" "sad" "yes" or "no". One little girl was learning symbols at home with her mother and wanted "vacuum cleaner" and "dishes." We tried to tune in to where the child is at and to begin with those symbols. Even the more difficult ones may be used in this initial stage if that's what's meaningful to the child.

<sup>Y.C.</sup> Next we want the child to start to realize that symbols represent a range of meaning, not just a specific word. Then we try to help him develop speed in using the symbols purposely. We continue working with the child to develop an understanding of the entire system, the strategies he can use, different levels of usage, and to learn to converse with a wide range of persons.

We first start with the basic symbols which are on separate 2" x 3" cards and are quite large and which some children are able to move around with their hands. We then introduce the 100 level. (Fig. 96) This level gives them a few feelings, the strategy of opposite, plurals, and the action symbol to create verbs. They are also given some nouns, some verbs, some additives, and two pronouns. We start to show them some of the characteristics of the symbol system. For example, direction





makes a difference; if an arrow goes up it means you're happy, down you're sad.

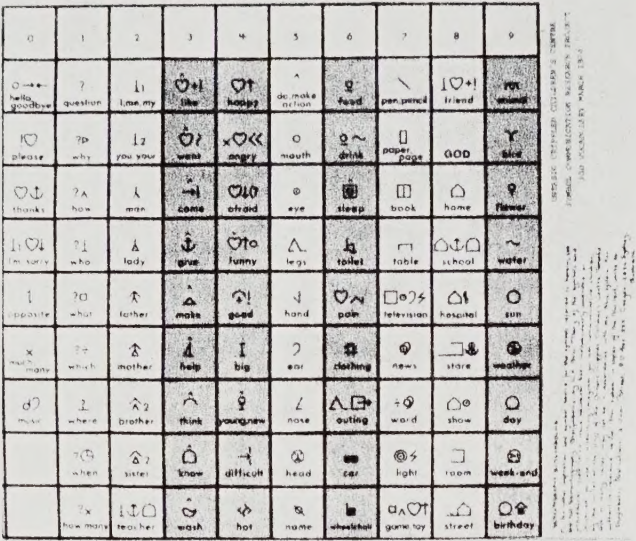


Figure 96. Blissymbol 100 Display

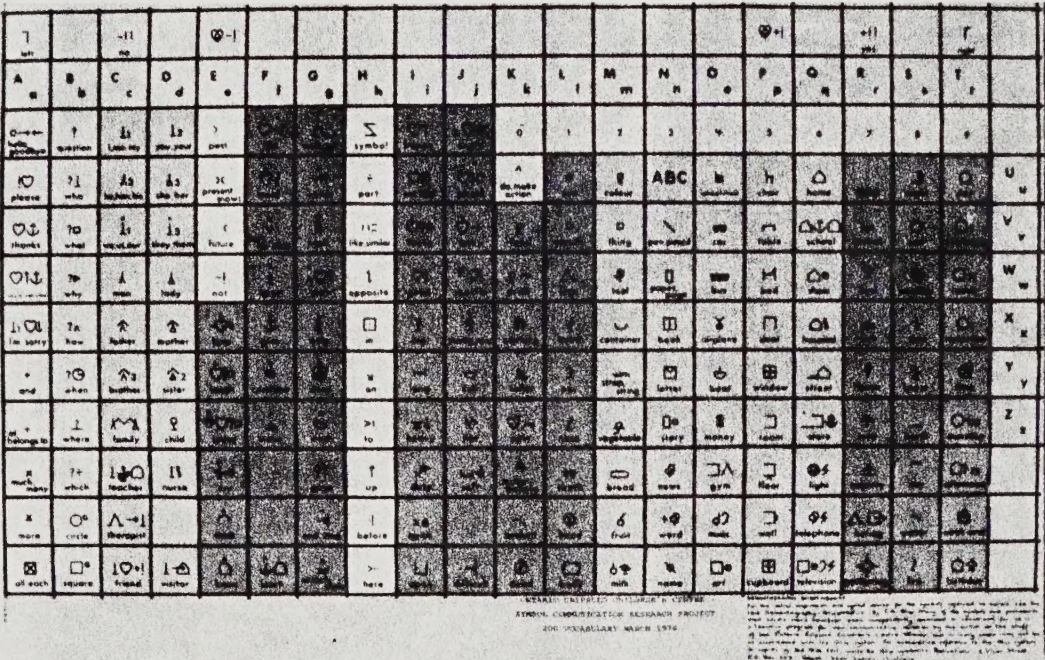


Figure 97. The Blissymbol 200 Display





At the 200 level we have added numbers and adjectives. The tense system has been put in and the negative has been added. We also include a few prepositions and adverbs, the conjunction "and" and the strategy "it's like something." The 200 level also includes the "combine" symbol. The 400 level gives the child more symbols with additional subordinating conjunctions, articles, multipliers, and a fourth geometric shape. (Figs. 97 and 98)

#### CHILD DEVELOPMENT WITH SYMBOLS

We have seen children developing in all areas through symbol use. In the beginning of the program we knew where the children were in their concepts and as the program has progressed we have watched their concepts expand and develop.

Socially the children were able to interact with a wider range of people through symbols, including people in their immediate environment, strangers, and speaking and non-speaking peers. This has had many, many ramifications.

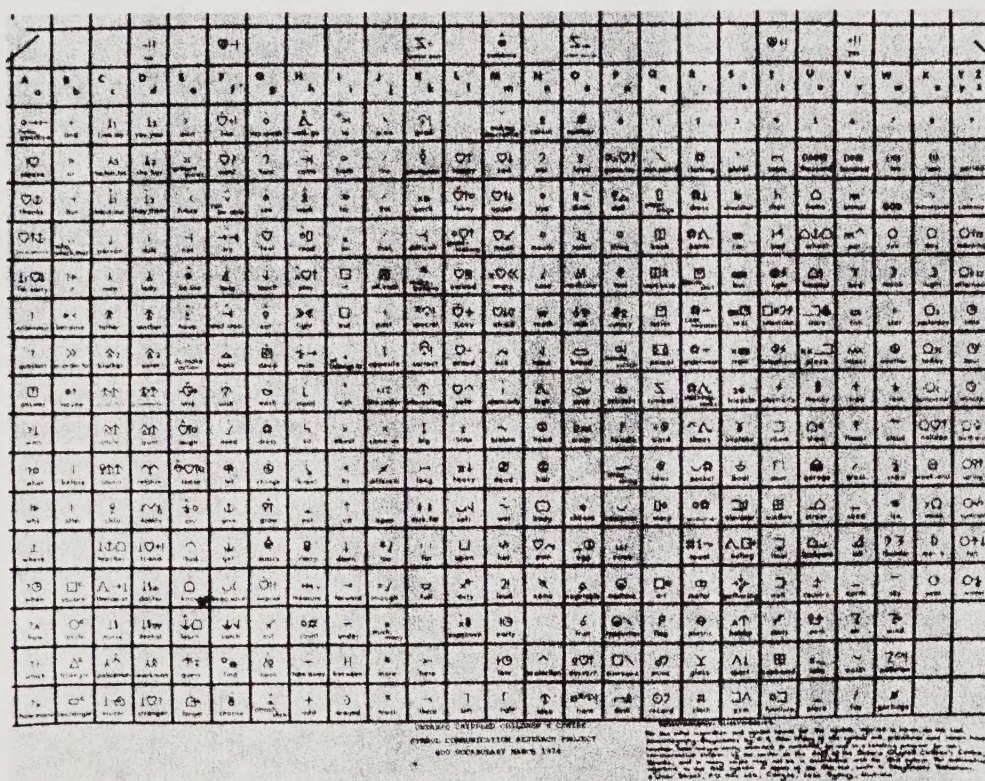


Figure 98. The Blissymbol 400 Display





In the area of emotional development we hear parents saying that now the children don't have to have a temper tantrum, they don't need an unsocial way to indicate displeasure. The children can analyze their own feelings and express themselves. They are able to say "I feel upset right now," or "I'm upset because so and so is doing something." They have a much better understanding of themselves.

We are not saying that symbols will be the only form of communication for these children. We are saying that right now symbols are a substitute for the speech they don't have and we hope that symbols will help the children develop until they are ready to use words. We don't know whether the children will want to retain the symbols or not; we don't know exactly what symbols are doing for them. Perhaps these children will have visual images of their world that we would never dream of...seeing the world and expressing things in a very different way. As our program goes on, we hope to learn more about how the children conceive of their world and how this affects them as they grow older.

We are thinking of the possibility of integrating the mentally able children into regular schools. They would not be able to go into regular classrooms because of their physical disabilities, but they could be placed in classrooms where they would be surrounded by speaking children and where they will be able to go to the same schools as their brothers and sisters. (Editor's note: Two OCCC symbol children were integrated into Special Education classes, regular schools, September, 1975.)

Some of our children will be going to schools for the retarded, some to orthopedic schools. There is one teacher who is teaching symbols to all her non-speaking children, regardless of their ages or reading abilities, because she feels that many of them are going to be living in institutions before their lives are finished. She wants them to be able to relate to everyone in that institution. We have cases of young people who could use wordboards, but who are going to a residence where they would not meet anyone who could read their wordboard. This teacher wanted her students to be able to communicate both with the symbol readers and the word users. Since the Bliss Symbols have both the symbol and the word, her children would be able to do this.

#### EXAMPLES OF COMMUNICATION THROUGH BLISS SYMBOLS

I can provide you with facts and figures on the various Bliss Symbol programs which have been implemented, and I will give you a few brief ones at the end, but I think you can understand the impact of the program much better if you can see some of the conversations and thoughts that the children are relating through the symbols.

The following symbol examples have been taken from the OCCC Symbol Communication Programme Year-End Report 1974. They have been substi-





tuted for the examples shown at the Workshop in order to up-date the samples of symbol output. (Pages 137-143.)

#### PROFILE OF CURRENT REPORTED SYMBOL PROGRAMS IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

As of June, 1974, 40 out of 60 invited settings responded to a survey conducted by the OCCC Symbol Communication Programme. This represented 150 symbol-using children. Results reported at that time indicated that 38% of the settings were retarded, 4% were opportunity classes (slow-learning elementary school classes), and over 50% were academic classes in orthopedic schools or opportunity centers.

Since one very strong argument that has been voiced against symbol use has been that it might discourage vocalization, we included this aspect in our study. The results showed that in 63% of the people who responded there had been no change in vocalization, while 35% noted an improvement. The two children for whom vocalization was reported to have decreased were both adolescents for whom vocalization had been non-functional.

We discovered that 43% of the symbol instructors were also making use of the alphabet which is on the larger Bliss symbol vocabularies and showing the children how to transfer and how to make use of the symbols along with the alphabet. For a more complete description of the results of this survey, please see Appendix A.

The program at the Ontario Crippled Children's Centre consists of two parts. The first is the classroom aspect which involves 20 children. The primary level class is composed of 12 children and 2 teachers, while the other class of 8 children and 1 teacher is at the kindergarten level. The children range in age from 5 to 13 and have varying degrees of physical disabilities. Half of the children point while the other half are either using electronic equipment or are getting a lot of help from the adults in the room. One very great advantage we have at the Crippled Children's Centre is a relatively large number of teachers' aides and volunteers.

The other half of the Crippled Children's Centre's program has to do with interaction and support of outside programs. We offer a resource workshop twice a year. These workshops run three days and are offered in the spring and again in the fall. In addition, we offer Bliss Symbol teaching guidelines and have Bliss Symbol displays which we have had printed so that they will be available to others.

We are members of the Symbol Coordination Committee. The Symbol Coordination Committee is composed of a group of instructors who have banded together to keep informed on the use of symbols and their development. This Committee publishes a newsletter four times a year made up solely from contributions from symbol instructors around the country.








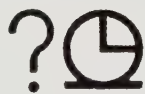
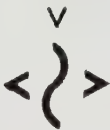


(2) INTERMEDIATE CLASS





Two examples of symbol output for each child using  
200 Vocabulary





A) Exceptional utterance      B) Typical utterance



Child 1. A)       
I      have      (a) treehouse      to sleep      in

   
when (it's) hot.

B)    
Dalmation      fire dog

Child 2. A)      
2      upsets      coming to      Bloorview Hospital  
Hospital BV

     
from      home      Sunday      night

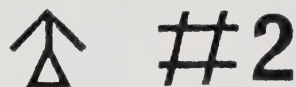
B)    
Traffic      gathering (of) cars





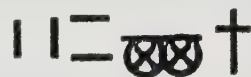
(3) Examples of Combined symbols created by Children using  
200 Vocabulary

gran mother

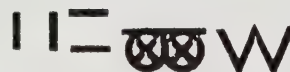


mother #2

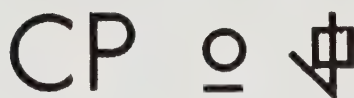
tricycle

like car,  
begins with T

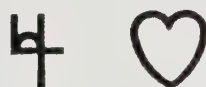
wagon

like car,  
begins with W

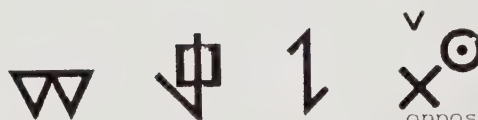
CP feeder

CP food tool

brave

strong feeling

tooth brush

tooth tool,  
opposite of dirty

to pick up

opposite of heavy

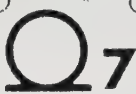


snowmobile

thing (for)  
snow like car





Child 1.


on Saturday I play cars(s)







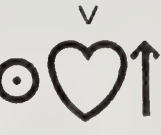
Child 2.






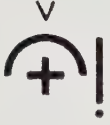

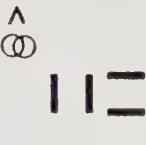



I have (a) girl friend named











Ann and I love her because (she's) pretty

Child 3.

a good man knocks similar to fight

on (the) door








The fire eater man(who)eats comes out.






and knocks him out





## (5). A SYMBOL POEM

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 }  
 Blast off!  
 time

$\perp$   $\overset{\wedge}{\oplus}$   $\perp$   $\overset{\wedge}{\Delta}$   $\times$   $/$   $\smile$   
 I'm pretending I'm going on the moon

$\perp$   $\overset{\wedge}{\Delta}$   $>\cdots$   $+$   $\cdots<$   $+$   $>\cdots$   $+$   
 I'm going here and there and here and

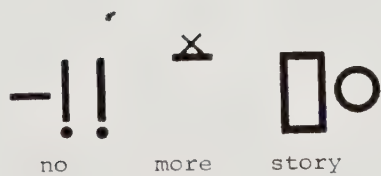
$\cdots<$   $+$   $>\cdots$   $+$   $\cdots<$   
 there and here and there

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 }  
 Blast off!

CONTINUED .....









RESPONSE TO  
COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS REGARDING  
BLISSYMBOLICS  
AS A COMMUNICATION MEDIUM FOR  
NON-SPEAKING PHYSICALLY-HANDICAPPED CHILDREN

BY: SHIRLEY McNAUGHTON, DIRECTOR  
SYMBOL COMMUNICATION PROGRAMME  
ONTARIO CRIPPLED CHILDREN'S CENTRE

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STATEMENT ONE:

"Why not teach him to read instead?" If a child is bright enough to learn symbols, it would be better to devote attention to teaching him words which everyone else uses and thus spare the child the time and effort involved in learning two different systems.

RESPONSE ONE:

This argument is based on the following premises:

1. words and symbols are organized in the same way;
2. words and symbols require the same learning abilities;
3. communication facility utilizing each system can be acquired with an equal amount of effort and time;
4. words and symbols fulfill the same function.

However:

1. Written words are composed of visual elements (letters and groups of letters) which are related to sound. Blissymbols are composed of visual elements which are related to meaning -- sometimes directly through pictorial representation; sometimes indirectly through representing an idea related to the meaning; sometimes arbitrarily.





2. When the young child first learns words, he must remember an abstract visual configuration; any clues relating this configuration to other parts of the system are based on sound-shape relationships. When the young child first learns Blissymbols he must remember a pictorial representation which refers by its outline directly to the object it portrays.
3. Communication facility utilizing the word system is dependent upon skill in spelling - for which training and practice is required. Facility utilizing the Blissymbol system is dependent upon the ability to select the meaning elements (essential characteristics) required to transmit meaning - for which the abilities to classify and describe are required.
4. Both systems do indeed share the common function of providing a vehicle for communication; however, the degree of communication comprehensiveness of each system which can be acquired by the young child and the additional functions served by each system are different and should be recognized.
  - a. Words prepare the child for reading and typing (the physically-handicapped child's potential written output medium). Words also provide the child with a communication medium which can gradually expand as he masters a growing vocabulary.
  - b. Blissymbols equip the child with a complete communication system (accessible to the bright child within a four to fifteen month period). Blissymbols also provide the child with a medium which facilitates creative thinking, inductive processing and concept clarification. Utilization of the medium involves a conceptual framework which gives the child another perspective in viewing and relating to his world. Blissymbols provide experience in the processing of visual information and thus contribute to learning to read. Incidental experience with words is provided through the child's constant access to the words which appear under each symbol on his display.





In Summary:

Words provide early limited communication which gradually expands; they prepare for reading and typing. Blissymbols provide earlier comprehensive communication and contribute to creativity and cognitive development; they prepare for reading through experience with the process but not directly with the content of the written English system.

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STATEMENT TWO:

"Words can do as much as symbols can do." If a child has 100 spaces which can be clearly indicated by him, he will be able to communicate as fully with 100 words in the spaces as he would do with 100 symbols occupying the spaces.

RESPONSE TWO:

This statement fails to recognize the communication potential arising from the structure of the Blissymbol System. Each symbol, whether it be a simple or compound symbol, represents a concept which can encompass a range of meanings and be translated by many words. e.g. The symbol for "building" can be interpreted as house, home, structure, hotel, garage, shack, palace, office, tent, etc., through utilizing information from the situational context or by responding to additional symbol clues.

Secondly, each symbol element can be combined and recombined with other elements to form new concepts.

One hundred symbols can lead to an infinite number of words - as many as the child's creative ability will allow. Only through the ability to spell could the word system provide the same communication potential. It can be argued that a broad meaning can also be taken from individual words and that symbols are not necessary. This can certainly be done by those skilled in relating with the children but it involves mis-using a system which is based upon precision and accuracy of word meaning. One feels that the child is using a rudimentary form of the word system (e.g. pidgin English); whereas with



symbols, the child is creatively using a device which is an integral part of the system. The child is indicating a mastery of the symbol system which gains him recognition rather than utilizing an inferior form of the word system which tends to minimize his capabilities as perceived by others.

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STATEMENT THREE:

"Symbols emphasize that the child is different and present a negative image to others."

RESPONSE THREE:

Our experience has been just the opposite. When open-minded newcomers meet symbol-using children for the first time, they are intrigued by the uniqueness of the children's communication mode. They are impressed with the children's ability to relate with others and to communicate unanticipated information. As they become aware of the children's ability to create new symbols and the manner in which the symbol output is integrated with gesture, early alphabet skills and vocalization, most persons become highly motivated to interact with the children and to learn enough about the symbols to communicate at a level which utilizes the many strategies inherent in the structure of the system.

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STATEMENT FOUR:

"Symbols restrict the number of persons with whom the children can communicate, for one must know the symbol system before one can understand the children's output."

RESPONSE FOUR:

Not true! One does not have to learn the symbol system in order to communicate with a symbol-using child. A WORD APPEARS UNDER EVERY SYMBOL on the child's display. Those persons who do not have the time or the desire to learn the symbols can communicate at the word level with every symbol-using child. Basic communication is possible with everyone.





STATEMENT FIVE:

"Blissymbols are best suited to serve as a communication medium for the mentally retarded child. The bright child should learn words." OR CONVERSELY  
 "Blissymbols are too difficult for the mentally retarded child; only the child with average or above average intellectual ability should be introduced to the symbols."

RESPONSE FIVE:

There is need for exploration of symbol use by children at differing intellectual levels. The child's intellectual ability will determine the use he makes of the symbols. The child with limited mental ability will require a teaching approach suited to his needs and will limit his communication to basic needs and immediate situations. The brighter child can become involved with the organization and strategies of the system and can become proficient at communicating at various levels, dependent upon the symbol expertise of the person with whom he is communicating. Inherent in the Blissymbol system is a complex, comprehensive, creative communication potential, (the details of which are outlined in C.K. Bliss' text Semantography - Blissymbolics, Semantography-Blissymbolics Publications) which can serve the symbol-user into adulthood, should he wish to continue an involvement with the system!

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STATEMENT SIX:

"Blissymbols are only useful as a bridge to reading."

RESPONSE SIX:

Blissymbols do provide an excellent preparation for learning to read (see response number 1). They are, however, components of an independent communication medium and deserve recognition in this capacity. The symbol system, Blissymbolics, contains an organization and structure which makes it a valuable communication medium with potential application to a wide range of children and adults with communication difficulties.

